

Book reviews

Stuart: A Life Backwards. Alexander Masters, Perennial, 2005, ISBN 0-00-720037-4

This book is the story of a remarkable friendship between a Cambridge writer and illustrator Alexander Masters and Stuart a homeless polydrug addict with a borderline personality disorder. They meet whilst Stuart is begging outside Sydney Sussex College and they become involved in a campaign to release two charity workers from prison.

The biography is told backwards and the reasons for his behaviour slowly unfold, particularly his unusual medical diagnosis and teenage experiences. It is well written with humour and quirky illustrations by the author. It swings from despair to compassion and is full of surprises.

Forensic Physicians frequently meet patients like Stuart in custody suites, prison and general practice. I feel we can achieve a better understanding of the attraction of drugs and alcohol when reading books written by self confessed addicts. Take this opportunity to learn more about forensic psychiatry, substance misuse, prison life, street slang and court appearances from the defendants point of view.

It is an instructive, powerful and humane book.

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doi:10.1016/j.jcfm.2006.03.003

Saukko, P. Knight, B. Arnold, Knight's Forensic Pathology, third ed., Arnold, London, 2004, ISBN 0340760443

Knight's Forensic Pathology remains one of the leading texts in its field and will have appeal to not only practising forensic pathologists and forensic medical examiners, but also to general histopathologists, histopathology trainees and physicians in emergency medicine.

In both hospital and coronial post mortems, the pathologist must always be aware of any unnatural cause of death. There are numerous signs which may raise suspicion which are well described and illustrated within this text, for example particular types of scars and demarcations as well as elucidating the natural and unnatural causes of asphyxia. The general histopathologist will sometimes perform autopsies on cases where no cause of death is found at post mortem but poisoning is discovered on routine toxicology examination. There are chapters which extensively document the various types of toxins with the effects they may produce, how long they remain in the circulation and the metabolism. The analysis of the toxicology report is also included with reference to avoiding over-interpretation. The text on obtaining samples at autopsy is exhaustive and well written.

Paediatric pathologists may find the chapter on stillbirth and sudden death in infancy useful however, the new literature on the management of SUDI including reference to

the post-mortem protocol, and the integrated role of the pathologist may need including in future editions.

Histopathology trainees have limited exposure to forensic pathology therefore this text provides an excellent overview of the subject. The post mortem currently comprises a significant part of the part two MRCPPath exam and this book is useful in that it also illustrates some of the more common natural causes of sudden death. The chapter on performing an autopsy provides a useful guide on dissection techniques with particular detail on examination of the heart which often causes much controversy amongst trainees! The section on the external examination is also worth consideration for the generalist. There are extensive descriptions since this often reveals many major clues, particularly in the forensic setting and this should not be overlooked in the hospital autopsy. Writing a report of the autopsy findings can often be challenging to a trainee when starting in histopathology. The description with a useful bullet point list of what to include is invaluable.

Doctors practising emergency medicine may well find the chapters on gun shot wounds and child abuse particularly useful since occasionally such cases appear with an elusive history. The text on gun shot wounds is extensive with superb diagrams on the trajectory of bullets on penetration, as well as good descriptions on the varying types of injury caused by the firearm and missile.

Obviously, this book has appeal for the forensic pathologist and medical examiner; throughout the book there are descriptions explaining the link between autopsy findings with the mode of injury and there is constant reference to the limitations of the post mortem findings. There is a significant overlap between the forensic, coronial and hospital post mortem and this book achieves this although with the obvious slant towards the forensic basis. Important aspects of the forensic examination include the identification of the body and careful documentation of the external examination, both of which are superbly written with excellent illustrations. An area that can be difficult for the forensic practitioner is determining suicide from homicide. The chapter on self inflicted injuries as well as many references in other chapters, highlights this problem and illustrates the classic modes and sites to determine this.

Although in places the book is a little brief in content, the references listed at the end of each chapter provides

the basis for further reading if required. It could also be said that there is too little emphasis on the histological examination at autopsy as sometimes this (possibly more in the hospital setting) can change a cause of death. However, where the microscopy is explored such as in subdural haemorrhages, myocardial infarcts or the histological dating of wounds the author provides a comprehensive analysis.

Overall, the impression is of a good well-structured logical layout interspersed with superb illustrative photographs and diagrams. Knight's Forensic Pathology is an exceptional comprehensive reference text and should be present in every histopathology department.

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doi:10.1016/j.jcfm.2006.03.004

Michael Tskos (Ed.). Forensic pathology reviews, vol. 4, Human Press (2006). 300 pp

I've never written a text book, so I can only guess at the enormity of the internal battles of authorship; the filtering of chaff from wheat; the fight to meet deadlines, and the gnawing anxiety and apprehension that eats at the heart of so many who create. No, I spare myself that agony. I buy books and savour the toil of others.

And so the authors start at an advantage with me. Not only do I like books, but I am impressed by book writers. This particular volume, however, gets more than simple respect from me. It has my admiration. It is an excellent volume, and deserves to be on the bookshelf of any serious Forensic Medical Practitioner.

For although it is clearly written with the Pathologist in mind, there is much that will educate and inform the Clinician as well. For example, the chapters on Neogenesis of Alcohol, and Agrochemical Poisoning (both topics with clinical resonances) are rendered part of the modern CFM scene, if by nothing else, by the clear descriptions and account of the issues written here. There is also a very instructive account of asthma deaths, as well as a well informed presentation of the difficulties of assessing and diagnosing elder abuse. Again, these are topics of interest to the Physician. And then there is the more traditional Pathology territory: Deaths from Lightning (and Sharp Force), Apoptosis In Tissue Injury (go and look it up!), and Postmortem Forensic Radiology, to name but a few of the 15 chapters.

The problem oriented approach to the subject matter is an appropriate modern style, and this book adds to the general forensic knowledge base by taking this tack. But for me, where this work really show its metal, is in the bibliography. There are pages where almost every sentence is suffixed. There are over 1300 references for the whole volume (a contemporary standard work of a similar size on my shelves has a tenth of that number). Time prevented me from checking them all for you, dear reader, but the few I did look up were on the button. The authors deserve much credit for emphasising the evidential base of their work. It can only help those that work in the courts, and one can only hope that this approach will become the norm for all works on forensic medicine in the future.

Despite my liking of this volume, I have one criticism. The reader is the loser by the exclusive use of monochrome illustrations. The histology pages particularly would have benefited from the use of colour plates. Publishing thrift perhaps, but misplaced in my view.

In conclusion: whilst not the whole scope of Forensic Pathology, (it is one of a series of four), this book, if a fair reflection of the Editors output, should not only be bought on its own, but serious consideration should be given by the prospective reader to buying it's sister volumes as well.

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doi:10.1016/j.jcfm.2006.07.001